CHAPTER SIX

Musical Beasts: The Swan-Phoenix in the Ibn Bakhtishū' Bestiaries

Anna Contadini

As Robert Hillenbrand has shown considerable interest over the years in the ‘reading’ of paintings, including those in bestiaries,¹ it seems appropriate to dedicate this paper to him especially as the topic to be discussed also ties in with his love of music.

In what have become known as the bestiaries of the Ibn Bakhtishū’ tradition the treatment of each animal is normally divided into two sections: a discussion of characteristics which derives from Aristotle’s Zoology; and a listing of medicinal preparations utilising different parts of the animal which derives from Ibn Bakhtishū’ himself.² The last member of a renowned family of Nestorian physicians who ran the School of Medicine at Jundishāpur (south-west Iran), 'Ubayd Allāh Ibn Jibrā’īl Ibn Bakhtishū’ (d. 1058), was a contemporary and friend of Ibn Butlān. Of his various works on medicine the most celebrated is the Kitāb tabā’ī al-ḥayawān wa khawāṣṣihā wa manāfī’i ḍa‘īhā (‘Book of the characteristics of animals and their properties and the usefulness of their organs’), which, however, only survives as incorporated into the composite text of the Kitāb na‘t al-ḥayawān (henceforth Na‘t) and the later bestiaries of the same tradition.

A text for the swan-Phoenix is present in two of the illustrated Ibn Bakhtishū’ bestiaries: the Na‘t, where it is called arghūn [Plate 13] and the Escorial Manāfī’, where it is called sūryānās.³ (Plate 14). It is also found in a fourteenth-century unillustrated version of Ibn Bakhtishū’’s bestiary, where it is called sīrīnās.⁴ This animal is absent from the somewhat reduced version of the Paris Manāfī’, and likewise from the Morgan Manāfī’.⁵

Similar versions to the Na‘t and the Escorial Manāfī’ are found elsewhere in zoological literature. For example, we find the following account in the fourteenth century author al-Damirī in his Hayāt al-ḥayawān [A Zoological Lexicon], where, on the authority of al-Qazwīnī, it is called Abū Sayrās. Jayakar translates the passage as follows:
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Al-Kazwini states in *al-Ashkâl* that it is a certain animal found in thickets and having in its nasal cavity twelve perfect holes. When it breathes, there is heard coming from its nose a sound like the sounds of flutes, and the other animals thereupon gather (round it) to hear that sound; if any of them happens to become confounded with the sound, it seizes that animal and eats it, but if it does not find it practicable to seize any of them, it gives a terrible scream, upon which the other animals separate and flee away from it.6

As for al-Qazwini himself [end of the thirteenth century], we find in his *'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt* two ‘musical’ animals represented, in the illustrated copies of this text,7 not as birds but as quadrupeds, although the text itself does not specify the type of animal. It is only for the second one that we may infer, from the text, that it is a quadruped, as it has a horn. The texts may be translated as follows:

The Sīrānas. It is said that the Sīrānas is a creature which can be found in the thickets of Kabul and Zabulistan. It has twelve holes in its beak. Whenever it breathes, one hears in its breath the sound of the *mizmār* [a woodwind instrument], and it is believed that the *mizmār* was created after this creature’s beak. Birds, wild animals and other creatures always gather around the Sīrānas in order to listen to its sound. Sometimes they are overwhelmed by the ecstasy of listening. When the Sīrānas notices that they have swooned away it kills as many as it wants. If it does not want to eat any of them it may be annoyed at them gathering around and so it lets out a fearful screech, from which all the animals flee.

The Shādawār. This is a creature that can be found in the furthest regions of the Byzantine empire. It is also called *drs*. It has a horn, and this horn has forty-two hollow branches. When the wind blows, the air collects inside and one can hear a very sweet sound coming from it. The animals gather around the creature to listen to the sound. It is reported that a horn of one of those animals was given to a king as a gift. He placed it in front of him when the wind blew, whereupon it produced a sound such that those who heard it were almost overwhelmed by delight. From the horn came such a wonderful sound that the king’s ears almost stopped out of sheer rapture. Then he put it upside down, and out of the horn came a sound so sad that from hearing it people were almost compelled to weep.8

The text in the three Ibn Bakhtishū’ manuscripts is peculiar, as it does not strictly conform to the bipartite characteristics plus usefulness structure: the second section is missing in the *Na’t*, and it is only briefly represented in the Escorial and Princeton manuscripts.

The text in the *Na’t* is briefer than the other two, but congruent with them:

[Fo. 55v] [Characteristics of the arghān]. The authorities on animals and the interpretation of ancient sources say that this is a sea animal

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[fo. 55v] with a large beak in which there are various holes producing a variety of sounds [Representation of the Arghūn, and miniature] and melodies so marvellous that they render those who listen unable to move. Some claim that from it the Phrygians derived the reed-pipe (zamr), with which they used to cure various illnesses. It is also said that it is a sea animal which produces entrancing sounds and that seafarers call it 'the one who plays the reed-pipe (zāmīr)'.

A more substantial version is related in the Escorial Manafi' (and virtually identical in the Princeton manuscript) as follows:

[Fo. 112r] The suryānas, which is the one that plays a wind instrument (miniature of the suryānas). According to the authorities on animals and those of musical science and those who interpret ancient sources, this is a sea bird with a big beak [fo. 112v] in which there are various holes producing a variety of sounds and melodies so marvellous that they render those who listen unable to move. Some claim that from it the Phrygians derived the reed-pipe (zamr), with which they used to cure various illnesses. It is also said that it is a sea animal which produces entrancing sounds and that seafarers call it 'the one who plays the reed-pipe (zāmīr)'. We were told by Yānis ibn Istifan, the interpreter who brought a missive from the Byzantine emperor to the noble presence of al-Nasr [may he reign for ever!], that people heard these sounds on certain islands, tried to find them and encountered walls constructed with holes such that when the wind blew through them one could hear these marvellous sounds. The inhabitants of these islands call this strīnā. It seems that these people built these walls as a trap so that when this animal heard sounds similar to its own it would go there and in this way it could be hunted. [fo. 113r] Authorities on medical science have spoken of the useful properties of this animal, among which is that its bile, when mixed with a little musk and diluted in water of fleawort in the weight of a qirāt then being given as a nasal injection to the insane, is marvellously beneficial.

To what extent might this story relate to a real animal as well as being a weaving together of various mythical strands; and might one also suspect contamination with knowledge of mechanical contrivances? The names given already suggest a conflation, indeed a confusion, of ideas of differing origins. In the Naʿīr we have arghūn, suggesting an association with an instrument, the hydraulis, a water-powered organ that was less purely musical than a sonorous part of the world of automata familiar with, for example, al-Jazari, and in this connection one could well imagine a parallel, in the holes of the beak and the imitative sound-producing wall, with mechanical ‘musical’ or ‘noise-producing’ animals, not just in Byzantine times but also in the Islamic period, as, probably, witnessed by the Pisa Griffin.9 The possibility of such a connection is strengthened by the fact that the arghūn/hydraulis was never integrated into Arab musical
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There is the Qaqnus, a peerless bird, heart-enrapturing;  
This bird’s abode in Hindustan.  
It has a strong beak of astonishing length,  
Like a reed-pipe, in it many apertures;  
There are about a hundred holes in its beak.  
It has no mate: it functions entirely virginally.  
There is in every stop a different note,  
Beneath every note of its, a different mistery.  
When on all the stops it moans its plaintive song,  
On its account birds and fishes are filled with ecstasy.  
All the birds fall mute; In rapture at its lament, senseless do they fall.  
There was a philosopher, he took to its harmonies:  
The art of music from its singing he took.  
The years of its life were about a thousand.  
It clearly knew the time of its death.  
When, the time of dying, it divorced its heart from itself,  
Round itself it collected ten or more loads of brushwood bundles.  
In the midst of all this kindling it set up a great commotion;  
It emitted a hundred notes, its own mournful dirge;  
Then from each of those stops, for its pure soul  
Another keening wail, filled with awful grief, it uttered.  
While from every hole, like the paid mourner,  
It made a different lament in another key,  
In the middle of the dirge for the sorrow of death,  
All the time it was seized with trembling like a leaf.  
At its shrieking all the birds of the air,  
And at its piping all the beasts of the field  
Came towards it as the onlookers.  
Their hearts all at once divorced from the world:  
Because of its grieving that day in its agony,  
A multitude of living creatures with it would die.  
All at its laments into confusion fell.  
Some through lack of strength did expire.  
It was a most amazing day, that day of its;  
Tears of blood dripped at its soul-searing wail.  
Then, when its life reached the final breath,  
Its wings and flight feathers would it flap backwards and forwards.  
A fire sprang out from under its pinions.  
Then this fire changed the phoenix’s state:  
The fire quickly falling into the kindling faggots,  
So that it flares up, completely to set the firewood alight.  
The bird and the wood both turn to embers.  
After the embers come the ashes too.  
When no live embers are left to be seen,  
A phoenix rises from the ashes to be seen.  
Once the fire reduces that kindling to cinders,  
From the midst rises up a baby Qaqnus.
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The parallels with the text of the bestiaries are striking. But what we encounter here is an actual identification, and a conflation of the phoenix legend with that of the swan-song.

As the bestiary texts nowhere identify a particular species, we need to turn to the two miniatures to see if there is any reflex of 'Aṭṭār’s identification with the swan or, more generally, whether there was agreement as to what sort of bird this was thought to be.¹⁷

The Miniatures

The miniature in the Na’t is very impressive (Plate 13). It is of a light-blue bird with the characteristic gold roundels to mark the upper part of the wings. There is only a red line to mark the lower part of the miniature, but despite the absence of landscape elements which would have given scale, the bird depicted is clearly meant to be rather large, as indeed occupies a large part of the page. Considered in relation to the other birds, the features that may provide identificatory clues are body shape, beak and feet. With regard to the feet, it may be noted that text and miniature are discrepant: for what is described as a seabird one would expect webbed feet, but although webbed feet were certainly part of the painter’s repertoire, being given on the duck (fo. 10r), the feet of the arghūn are the generalised claw type given for all other birds, predatory or not. As far as the shape of the body is concerned, it is to be connected not with birds of prey, but, rather, with the heron, crane, duck or hen.

The gold beak has numerous holes in it, represented by black dots, and its shape is curved, similar to most other birds depicted in the manuscript, and, unlike the body, is not connected with that of the duck, but rather with birds of prey such as the falcon or the eagle (fos 29v and 27r).

In the Escorial Manāfi’ī, as is usual, the miniature is framed by thin blue lines with decorative devices at the corners, and the bird is set against a gold background (Plate 14). It is again rather large, but this time orange in colour. The neck and body bear a resemblance to a goose, a duck or a swan, but again it has not got webbed feet, but feet with claws. The beak is particularly long here, similar to a goose and some types of duck, thickening towards the end. The holes in the beak are rendered as small, regular circles. In this manuscript too webbed feet are only given to the duck and the goose (fo. 16r).

Although much more could be said about the miniatures, their composition remains analogous to that of the text, differing only in the range of motifs available to the painter. The text is a complex combination of multiple themes, shaping into a new form of narrative elements derived from myths of the sea and the sky, of sound and enchantment, endlessly reprocessed since classical antiquity and, for all the gaps in documentation, leaving a trail of textual residues that allow for detailed scholarly investigation of connections and origins. In echoing this material the miniatures also call upon a repertoire of
pictorial conventions for which analogies and antecedents can be located, but have the harder task of creating a depiction of the imaginary through a playful combination of a relatively limited stock of visual conventions. Moreover, the imaginary elements to which the miniature must respond are primarily narrative: to help visualise the creature the only clues the text offers are that it is a seabird and has a large beak. Although by no means ornithologically naive (herons are not portrayed like grouse nor hawks like geese), the various bird miniatures can be viewed as variations on a set of types, each characterised by the standardised shapes of its various body parts and by size. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that both painters should have settled for a bird of imposing size and with the substantial plump body-type associated with ducks and geese, and that as much in order to accommodate the depiction of numerous holes as to follow the statements about the size of the beak both painters emphasise this feature, even if differing in the type chosen. That the feet of this seabird are not webbed can then be read as a further clue: if all the morphological features (apart from the holes in the beak) occur in the depiction of real birds, it is the abnormal combination of them that signals the imaginary.

Notes


7. See, for example, the Qazwini manuscript in the National Library in Munich, Cod. Arab. 464, fo. 181v, where miniatures of both the Sūrān and the Shādawār are found. For this manuscript and its illustrations, see H. C. Graf von Bothmer, 'Die Illustrationen des Münchener Qazwini von 1280 AD', Ph.D. dissertation, Universität München, 1971. For reproductions of the Shādawār, which is sometimes identified with the unicorn, from various Qazwini manuscripts, see Richard Ettinghausen, *The Unicorn*, Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, vol. 1, no. 3, Washington, 1950, pls 42 and 43.


11. Henry George Farmer, *Studies in Oriental Musical Instruments*, first series (London, 1931), 56–8, also mentions the name sūrānayi and says that this form occurs in al-Mas'ūdi and in the *Kitāb al-masāqīt al-kabīr* of al-Fārābi (d. c. 950). Also, he says that 'As far back as 1140, Kosegarten suggested that it was intended for surnāyì' (57). He suggests that sūrānayi would appear to have been the original form, and it was due to the fact that it was a Syrian instrument (*nāy īrum*), the word being derived apparently from *Surya* (Syria) and *nayi* or *nay* (reed). The Syrians had long been noted for their 'wood-wind' instruments (58).

12. M. L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford, 1992), 330–1: 'The aulos is first attested at the end of the eighth century [8c]. From at least the fifth century the Greeks believed that they owed the introduction of aulos music to a Phrygian or Mysian piper called Olympus ... Another Phrygian, Hyagnis or Agnis, was held to [331] have been the first aulete of all ... But certainly the Greeks felt the aulos to be especially appropriate to the Phrygian mode, and Phrygian slave auletes were not unfamiliar figures in Archaic Greek society.'


16. Farīdū’d-Dīn ʿAttār, *The Speech of the Birds. Concerning Migration to the Real. The Mantiqu’t-Tair*, presented in English by P. W. Avery, The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge 1998, 208–10. For the Persian text, see the edition by Goharīn (Tehran, 1374), 129–31. About the name Qaṣnus, Avery gives the following explanation: 'Qaṣnus or Qaṣnūs, for the Greek kūknoς, Latin cygnus, or cygnus, the "swan", especially
famed in ancient legend for its dying song, but the word might also be translated “phoenix”. For, in addition to its having the power to produce amazing music by letting the wind on a mountain-top blow through, some accounts say, as many as three-hundred and sixty holes in its powerful beak, it is a bird that, after living a thousand years, collects a mound of brushwood, and then by ecstatically flapping its wings, produces fire which lights the faggots so that the bird is burnt away, but it parthenogenetically produces an egg that is left in the ashes so that, in its offspring, this bird may rise again. See also M. H. Ibn al-Khalaf al-Tabrizi, *Buzhân-i Qâti*, ed. M. Mo’in, 4 vols (Tehran, 1951-6), 3:1535-6.

17. C. R. Bravo-Villasante, *Libro de las Utilidades de los Animales* (Madrid, 1980), 100, identifies the bird as a pelican, but there is no supporting evidence for this identification either lexicographical or textual. The story of the pelican as is found in the medieval bestiaries of the west and in their predecessor the *Physiologus* is totally different from the *suryanas/arghīn* story in our bestiaries. In the *Physiologus* we find the very famous story which will then be repeated almost unchanged in the medieval bestiaries of the west: that the Pelican greatly loves its young, but when these grow up they rebel or attack their parents, who, becoming very angry, kill them. But after three days the parents regret what they have done and so the mother picks at her right side so that blood flows all over the young and in this way they are revived. This, in the moralising *Physiologus* and bestiaries, is a metaphor for Christ, who shed his blood to save humanity and so forgave its mortal sins.
Plate 13 The arghūn (or swan-phoenix), Ibn Bakhtīshūʾ, Kitāb naʾt al-ḥawayān, probably North Jazira, c. 1220. Miniature 80 × 120mm.

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